

# case study

## Reading Partners activity profile: Bristol *Big Read*

**The Reading Agency's Reading Partners project is transforming the way publishers and libraries work together, creating successful and exciting events and activities for readers. The Reading Agency, is the independent charity working to inspire more people to read more.**

"Jeffrey Archer was a real showman; both honest and blunt about his work. I was amazed and pleased that this was a free event; these sorts of events show libraries to be a professional and truly public service." Alexia Gardner, Bristol *Big Read* author event attendee.

*Only Time Will Tell* is the first novel in Jeffrey Archer's new bestselling family saga *The Clifton Chronicles*, set in Bristol and centred around the life and family of Harry Clifton, born in the backstreets of Bristol in 1919. Bristol City Council's library service had helped publishers Macmillan – a launch member of Reading Partners – to publicise the novel's hardback launch, and Destination Bristol – the destination management partnership for Bristol and South Gloucestershire – had acted as major supporters due to its setting. So for the book's paperback launch, Macmillan's marketing team decided to join up promotional planning with Bristol libraries, with lead literature development charity for the South West Cyprus Well, and The Reading Agency, with libraries to be the driving force in linking *Only Time Will Tell* to the city of Bristol, and in encouraging Bristol's citizens to adopt the novel as their own.

"We had run a *Big Read*-style initiative based around location with York Libraries for author J C Sansom, and we were keen to see if we could make something similar work for *Only Time Will Tell* on the back of the great initial local response," explains Macmillan marketing director Rebecca Ikin.

Reading Partners advised on the original plan, making sure the objectives were clear and achievable. It centred around bringing Jeffrey Archer to the city for an author event with book sales by Foyles, but included giving away 600 free copies of the book – Bristol Libraries agreed to hand out 500 copies and asked for 100 more to add to their stock, to lend when the giveaway copies ran out – plus a Twitter conversation about it. Destination Bristol also offered do-it-yourself tours of Harry Clifton's Bristol, offering the chance to visit key historic landmarks featured in *The Clifton Chronicles* such as Bristol's docks, the Clifton Suspension Bridge, Bristol Grammar School and The Royal Hotel.

Promoting the *Big Read* was by necessity a joint effort, not least because a venue was only finalised with less than a month to go to Jeffrey Archer's scheduled September 2011 appearance. Bristol Libraries stepped in, offering the reading room at their Central Library.

Part of the support Cyprus Well provides to develop writers in the South West includes marketing and promotions support for anyone with a reading or writing

event. They posted the event to their 'what's on' calendar as well as contacting members about it, providing coverage in their newsletter and across their online and social media channels. Cyprus Well staff also took part in a twitter conversation about the *Big Read*.

Meanwhile, perhaps the highest-profile cornerstone in the promotional campaign was the media wall advert at Bristol Temple Meads railway station, which was provided by Macmillans.

*"We were concerned that, given the short notice with which we took on the event, our press office might not be in a position to promote it, so Destination Bristol volunteered to take that on,"* adds Andrew Cox, Bristol Libraries' reading manager. His small team were responsible for distributing across their 27 libraries all the free books plus the leaflets and posters which Macmillan had produced, in consultation with them, for the author event. Bristol Libraries also brought their author event and reading group mailing lists into play, as well as internet and intranet news releases, the council's online events database and Twitter. *"Macmillan did a great job on the design and printing of all the publicity materials, which had a very polished look that we could not have achieved,"* Andrew continues.

With just four staff in this team, he was hard pressed to pull off all the event planning, booking and logistics on top of promotional activity.

*"Apart from anything else, the reading room is a beautiful space, but requires an awful lot of furniture moving, stewarding etc,"* he explains. "And of course, all that heavy furniture has to be put back at the end of the night!"

Nevertheless, on the night the doors opened on time, with the library cafe open to serve refreshments. Then Jeffrey Archer talked for half an hour, about his writing in general and the process by which he had researched and written *Only Time Will Tell*. A long question and answer session followed, to much acclaim and appreciation, including a very positive write up in the *Bristol Evening Post*.

Attendees concurred. Alexia Gardner saw promotional material for the event at her local Westbury library, and was given a free copy of *Only Time Will Tell*. She says: *"Jeffrey started by asking how many people wanted to, or had written or published a book. These author events encourage writers: Jeffrey revealed it was the 18th publisher approached that took up his first novel! He also shared with us how he tried to make sure that all the Bristol elements in his latest novel were accurate. I would have been prepared to pay to see him."*

*"I don't very often go to these sorts of events, but I have been to them before, at book shops mainly,"* adds Louise Rogers. *"I've never read any Jeffrey Archer books, but he was an entertaining speaker: in the question and answer session nothing was off limits, you could ask about anything. Whatever your opinion of Jeffrey Archer there's no doubt he won this audience round. I think it is great to do this kind of thing in libraries because unlike in a bookshop there is no pressure to buy the book, you can just borrow it."*

As a result of the Bristol *Big Read*, Macmillan's Rebecca Ikin feels she's made some great contacts within Bristol's library service. *"I'm sure we'll continue to work together on both The Clifton Chronicles series and for M R Hall, a Bristol-based author,"* she says.

*"This sort of initiative reinforced the power of advertising via libraries – when publicity material is of a good quality, of keeping mailing lists, and the usefulness of Bristol City Council's staff intranet system,"* explains Andrew Cox. *"This has also been the first event where participants have told us they attended as a result of finding out about it via social media, and it shows the public that Bristol's library service is a major player in the world of books – it was great to have our logo alongside the Foyles and Macmillan ones at Temple Meads station."*

Both librarian and publisher welcomed having Reading Partners' support on hand throughout. Andrew Cox could rely on them understanding the 'library perspective', along with his team's strengths and limitations.

*"And we trust that they will deliver on key elements of promotion and organisation; critical when committing a busy, high-profile author's time,"* adds Rebecca Ikin.

For Andrew Cox, there were however important future lessons to learn for library and publisher joint working alongside other partners on similar projects, such as how to get a successful Twitter conversation off the ground. *"Some additional support from our partners on the night would also have been appreciated,"* he reflects, *"particularly for a relatively large event with such a high-profile author".*

Tracey Guiry, Cyprus Well chief executive, concurs: *"We had relatively short notice for the event, but were able to get the message out through our online channels really quickly. However, I think that with a longer lead-time we could have done even more,"* she says. *"Our staff took part in the twitter conversation, but I think even the ephemeral twitter needs a bit longer to develop buy-in before the conversation begins, and some twitter feeds from the author in advance might have galvanised the audience to respond."*

Reading Partners' Sandeep Mahal is keen to build on such reflection. *"I thought the planning of the promotion went really well, but it could've been executed better, with more clearly defined roles and expectations,"* she concludes. *"I think there were many positives for libraries, publishers and authors, but I look forward to sharing the learning outcomes at our next library reps and publisher working group meeting."*

**Reading Partners involves the whole UK public library network and 34 major adult publishers. A children's version of the scheme was set up in May 2008 involving 12 children's publishers, The Publishers Association and the main children's library bodies. For more information, please contact Sandeep Mahal on 0871 223 2041 or [sandeep.mahal@readingagency.org.uk](mailto:sandeep.mahal@readingagency.org.uk)  
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